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Sex and the City: A Pseudo Sexual Revolution

What people don't understand is that talking about sex and sexual self-esteem is talking about equality – Amy Richards

It's easy to think, in the year 2007, that as a society we have achieved sexual equality; that men and women are equal in their ability to express themselves sexually in whichever way that they choose. Young women growing up in the twenty-first century, especially, are freer than ever to be unapologetic about their sexuality. Examples of this, prevalent in the media and television shows, suggest that it is more common and acceptable now for a woman to engage in sex with multiple partners or to seek a relationship solely for the sexual benefit of it—the female characters in the show *Friends* do this, and so does Elaine from *Seinfeld*. The media is able to portray women with a greater degree of sexual liberation than they could fifty years ago. For instance, the show *Sex and the City*, which ran from 1998-2004, produced by Darren Star, is critically acclaimed—“This show has been a sort of post-feminist empowerment of women” (The Guardian)—for portraying a group of women who unabashedly satisfy their sexual needs. This show makes it seem that finally women have escaped the stereotypes and judgments that have kept them from feeling free to explore their sexualities as fully as men. But have they?

If a goal in our society is to have no double standards between what is sexually acceptable for men and what is sexually acceptable for women, then, to many, it may seem that we have achieved it; however, much more progress needs to be made to eradicate double

standards that still exist. For example, Donna Castaneda and Alyson Burns-Glover claim that “although women today appear to have greater freedom of sexual expression than in the past, their sexuality is still a constant topic linked to sources of power” (71). This quotation asserts that although women may have more sexual freedom, they do not own their sexuality to the degree that men do. In fact, even with a woman’s freedom to assert her sexuality and practice it, there is a power struggle at play in which men still have the upper hand. *Sex and the City*—a pop-culture phenomenon of the twenty-first century—uses, in two of its four main characters, one of the most blatant examples of a dichotomous sexual stereotype: the Madonna—whore stereotype. This is detrimental to the progress that needs to be made toward sexual equality, and allowing a woman’s sexuality to be as inherent as a man’s. In an episode of *Sex and the City* Carrie asks her boyfriend, “Did you ever get a girl pregnant?” To which he responds, “not that I know of...” and Carrie says, “Damn it must be nice to be a guy sometimes” (Episode 59). As a man he has the freedom to be unconcerned with the possibility of pregnancy. Indeed, with all of the added societal pressure placed on women, it seems that men still have much more freedom with their sexual practices and the consequences of their actions¹.

Sex and the City ran on HBO for six seasons and follows six years in the life of four, thirty-something women who are all best friends. The show is based off of Candice Bushnell’s book of the same name. The book was compiled of columns that Bushnell had written for the *New York Observer* following real life situations experienced by her and her girlfriends. Carrie Bradshaw—the show’s narrator—is Bushnell’s alter-ego and the character who most closely follows Bushnell’s real life experiences. *Sex and the City* was picked up by HBO and producer Darren Star in 1998 and experienced great success world-wide in the following six years.

¹ I realize that men also have sexual stereotypes and expectations to battle; however, that is not the focus of this paper.

Many of the episodes address issues that will be discussed in this paper, but only three will be used as a lens through which to look at female sexuality: The first, “Coulda, Woulda, Shoulda”, (Episode 59) from season four, directed by David Frankel; the second, “The Fuck Buddy”, (Episode 26) from season two, directed by Alan Taylor; the third, “Running with Scissors”, (Episode 41) from season three, directed by Dennis Erdman. Looking at examples from these episodes will reveal the degree to which the media and producers, such as Darren Star, actually allow sexual equality to be portrayed in television shows directed towards women.

Statistically, women’s sexual desires and experience don’t differ that greatly from a man’s despite the obstacles they face. For instance, men and women age 30-44 were surveyed to find out how many sexual partners they have had. For men the average was 6-8, and for women it was 4 (Mosher, Chandra & Jones 2005). Another study found that 26% of unmarried men claim to have had sex a few times in the past month while the statistic for a woman was 24% (Laumann, Gagnon, Michael & Michaels 1994). Keeping in mind that in statistical analysis anything under 5% is considered insignificant; the differences in these numbers don’t reflect the stigma that women sometimes have to deal with, which is that they just aren’t as sexual as men. Exposing double standards that still exist can be easily done by looking at stereotypes and other confinements that have plagued women for years and studying the degree to which they are present today in the media and especially in pop-culture phenomenon such as *Sex and the City*.

The Madonna Whore Complex

This complex creates a stereotype in which a woman is either one archetype *or* the other. “The Madonna is nurturing and sexually pure, the whore is sexually available and free of nurturing” (Beneke 180). This complex suggests that a woman is *either* fully in charge of her

sexuality, *or* that she has none at all. Notice though that while one archetype suggests the woman's ownership of her sexuality, it is with a negative connotation: whore. This long standing sexist stereotype has been around for years, and it is dangerous to discuss women in this dichotomy because of how limiting it is. When women see the same two, opposite versions of an acceptable sexuality being portrayed it limits them from discovering and expressing their own unique sexuality. Some may believe that this stereotype is dated and is no longer represented in our society, however, one needs only to look as far as one of HBO's most acclaimed shows to find otherwise. *Sex and the City*, which was critically praised for its revolutionary honesty about a woman's sexuality, fails to do so by advocating the idea of the Madonna *or* whore attitude in the characters Samantha and Charlotte.

In the show, Samantha is a woman who wants nothing to do with relationships or monogamy; she is out to meet men solely for the purpose of having sex with them and is unapologetic about this fact. Throughout the six seasons that the show aired, Samantha's sexuality is compared numerous times to a man's, and the raciest scenes in the show are of Samantha and her various partners: "Her devouring of men has always put the sex in the show's title and allowed the male nudity quotient to skyrocket" (Goodman). Even her name, which the other girls usually shorten to "Sam," has masculine connotations. Samantha's sexuality and personality adhere strictly to the idea of the *whore* in this dichotomy. In Season Two alone she accumulates twelve sexual partners and refuses to engage in any romantic relationships; serious or otherwise. She is the quintessential *whore* out of the four main characters in the show, and what makes her sexual practices even more shocking is having Charlotte to compare her to. Samantha's counterpart, Charlotte, is the "Madonna." Charlotte—the only one of the four who obsesses about marriage and having children—is constantly appalled by Sam's sexual encounters

and teased by the other girls for being a prude. Charlotte lives on Park Avenue, a very white, upper class area, and seeks men with money and some kind of social standing. She believes in soul mates and that each of the girls will find theirs one day. A stereotypical hopeless romantic, Charlotte is the complete opposite of Samantha.

Charlotte's and Samantha's opinions about certain situations that arise are so obviously juxtaposed that one *has* to conclude that the show's producers do it intentionally. These two characters are consistently played off of one another to show the two extremes of female sexuality; however, the show portrays these extremes as common and normal rather than exposing them for the stereotypes that they are. How can a woman's sexual freedom truly be equal to a man's when it can't even be successfully portrayed in a fictional show? Samantha and Charlotte are needlessly on *complete* opposite ends of the sexual spectrum and are not given a unique sexuality, but rather, are reduced to stereotype. For example, in "Coulda, Woulda, Shoulda" (Episode 59), Miranda—another of the four main characters—has discovered that she is pregnant and that she wants to get an abortion. True to the stereotype projected on her, Sam is supportive of this decision and even admits that she has had two abortions. Charlotte, on the other hand, is extremely upset. She can't imagine having an abortion and feels cheated, as she has been trying desperately to get pregnant. While both women love and support Miranda, the extremity of their opposing views on sexuality is obvious in this episode. They represent a woman completely out of touch with her sexuality and a woman so overtly sexual that the only way to identify her sexuality is to compare it to a man's. Again, this is reinforcing a sexual stereotype to the show's viewers (mostly women) and perpetuating the cycle of repressed female sexuality. It isn't promoting individual sexuality, but rather two limited, stereotypical versions of female sexuality.

In a different episode, “The Fuck Buddy,” there is a discussion about fuck buddies². Carrie, Miranda, and especially Sam, share stories about theirs. Charlotte’s naïve nature is further revealed when she asks, “What’s a fuck buddy?” (Episode 26). Of course, Samantha is the one who describes this relationship to Charlotte and *of course* Charlotte responds asking, “And you just call this guy up when you’re horny?” (Episode 26). Even their knowledge about different sexual relationships is conducive to the opposite ends of the spectrum that these two characters have been placed on. It may seem that the show is portraying women with vastly different sexualities, and they are; however, the show is doing so in a one-dimensional way that doesn’t allow a woman the freedom to define her own unique sexuality.

Sex and the City’s use of this stereotype damages, to an extent, the progress that needs to be made to rid women’s sexuality of *any* stereotypes and allow women to be unapologetic about their individual and unique sexuality. This show, although off the air now, has a following of millions of female fans from around the world who regard it as some sort of survival guide: “An astounding 7 million people tuned in for last season's final episode” (Bendery and Wong). One has to wonder how close we really have come to sexual equality when female sexual stereotypes are being portrayed to women through four female characters in a show that is supposedly sexually progressive. It would seem that if the media and a show like *Sex and the City* can’t or won’t portray characters as uniquely sexual as an everyday woman then we are a ways off from doing away with the Madonna/whore complex or any other stereotype of female sexuality for that matter.

² Fuck Buddy- “someone with whom you are sexually involved, but with no (relationship, i.e. emotional or romantic) strings attached” (Lee).

Female Sexuality and Abortion Politics

Another inequality that women are faced with is their inability to make decisions regarding their sexuality because of political hindrance. Even in the twenty-first century there have been ongoing debates regarding a woman's right to make decisions about her body. Abortion is the most obvious debate that comes to mind; however, access to the morning after pill, birth control, or even access to information about safe sex is sometimes limited or questioned. "These debates reveal serious power struggles in society regarding women's sexual and reproductive rights" (Castaneda and Glover 71). The fact that these personal topics are even up for debate is yet another example of a woman being denied the right to be in control of her own sexuality. Men arguing about a topic such as abortion (which they are incapable of experiencing) shows where the power in our society lies: with the men. Even the show *Sex and the City* is based off of newspaper columns written by a woman; however, the show is produced by a man. How does this gender switch affect the actual feel of the show? The female experience that is conveyed through Candice Bushnell's columns is being interpreted into a TV show by a man, which inevitably has to, at least slightly, skew the original feel of the columns. Society should be asking questions about sexual equality when a so called sexually liberating show is being pitched to millions of women through a male producer. When the whole country, including our politicians, is constantly debating the degree to which a woman's body is her own how can a woman be completely free and comfortable in her sexuality?

Sex and the City illustrates how rampant these issues are in our present day and how women still have to struggle against them. In "Coulda, Woulda, Shoulda," Episode 59, Miranda's regular doctor won't perform the abortion or offer another alternative, and although she assures Miranda, "no judgment" (Episode 59), Miranda obviously feels judged. She ends up

deciding to keep the baby, but after much turmoil and deliberation. In this case, society's involvement in a woman's sexual right weighs heavily on the conscience of a woman and has "direct consequences upon [her] sexual reproductive rights and freedoms" (Castaneda and Glover 71), and overall, the choices that she ends up making. In the same episode Carrie is faced with the decision of whether or not to tell her current boyfriend that she had an abortion over ten years ago. She feels ashamed and after deciding to tell him, asks, "I'm still your girl, right?" (Episode 59) as if that fact that she has had an abortion would make him love her less. While I can appreciate the show's desire to stay somewhat neutral on the matter, their stance and the character's reactions to their situations speaks volumes about our culture's inherent view of an issue that is solely about a woman and her right to her own body. It would seem that Star and other producers are trying to pay tribute to this highly sensitive and highly debated issue while at the same time making sure that they maintain their reputation. A show that advocates a woman's complete right to her body would be completely pro-choice, and it would seem that producers weren't ready to attach that label to *Sex and the City*. This specific episode speaks to the popularity of abortion while at the same time slyly shaming the women who have utilized this procedure. Unlike men, women are plagued constantly with political issues regarding their sexuality and subsequently are challenged to ignore these or look beyond them when attempting to make decisions that affect their bodies.

Sex for the Hell of It

Something that is becoming less taboo in society is the idea of women having sex just for the sake of having sex. Fifty years ago it wouldn't be acceptable to assume that women would want men only for sexual gratification; in the 1950's "girls were encourage to pursue the sexual

cues that assailed them but [at the same time] were threatened with the loss of respectability” (Breines 87). Presently though, the idea has become more widespread; however, culturally, it is still not as acceptable for women to have casual sex as it is for men. The show *Sex and the City* unapologetically portrays its female characters as sexual beings who want to have sex regardless of whether or not a relationship accompanies it. While this is refreshing, there is still a slight double standard even in the show's portrayal of this. For example, in “The Fuck Buddy” (Episode 26), Carrie has a male “friend” whom she admits to calling only when she wants to have sex. In the episode they refer to this man as Carrie’s “Fuck Buddy”. Star (the producer) allows the show to adhere to many stereotypes of female sexuality, one being that a woman couldn’t possibly want sex from a man without a relationship. The character of Carrie is reduced to stereotype when she attempts to turn this sexual relationship into a dating relationship. Although the thought of a woman wanting a man just for sex is acceptable culturally, there is still an assumption that she will inevitably want more from him and Star allows this stereotype to be played out in the episode. After a few sexual encounters with her “Fuck Buddy,” Carrie decides to ask him out on a real date, and give the relationship a chance. Of course the said “Fuck Buddy” doesn’t seem very interested in furthering his relationship with Carrie. Again, this is reinforcing an idea that is culturally accepted: that what a woman *really* wants is a relationship and not just sex, while it is perfectly natural for a man to want the sex without the relationship.

Star portrays Samantha as the only character in the show who successfully explores the “no strings attached” sex on multiple occasions. Her sexual behavior is so shocking in fact, even to her friends, that the only way to explain her is as a woman with the sexuality of a man. There are multiple instances in the show where Sam’s libido is referred to as a man’s. The fact that her libido would be referred to as *anything* shows how society and the media need to somehow label

a woman's sexuality. No one would refer to a promiscuous man as having the sexuality of a woman. This is because men's sexuality has set the standard—"masculinity once again remains an authentic property of adult male bodies while other gender roles are available for interpretation" (Halberstam 431). Women are continually being measured up against and compared to the idea of male sexuality. The above quotation is insinuating that whatever the qualities of male sexuality are; they are natural, inherent and not available for interpretation, whereas female sexuality "reeks of [the] artificial" (Halberstam 431) and must be something that the female has constructed rather than something that she "just is" (Halberstam 431). So at this point, our society is prepared for women to act in whichever way that they choose, but it is assumed that they are *acting* rather than just *being* sexual. This paradigm is one that makes sexual equality more difficult for women to achieve, despite the freedom that they may feel to have casual sex.

Along similar lines, the idea of having multiple sexual partners is also acceptable for women but usually associated more with men. As mentioned before, the character of Sam accumulates the most sexual partners among the four main characters. She is more likely to have sex with a stranger and finds no fault in sleeping with a different man every night. In one episode Samantha meets her male counterpart—a man known throughout the city for being good in bed and having had many sexual partners. In this episode the two of them arrange to have sex, but just as things are progressing he asks Sam if she's had an AIDS test, which she has not. He responds by saying, "When you have as much sex as we do, you need to know you're being safe" (Episode 41). The remainder of the episode includes Sam admitting that she is afraid to get tested and finally, her trip to the doctor. This episode is advocating safe sex, which is an admirable and important message. But why is it the woman in this situation who is portrayed as

the naïve one, or the one who is too afraid to get tested? Samantha, out of the four main characters, is the one shown to feel the most freedom in her sexual escapades; she doesn't worry about what society may think of her and unapologetically owns her sexuality. In this episode, however, she is being portrayed as someone who is not in complete *control* of her sexuality and the safety that needs to be involved. Sam is as equal as a man in her ability to express her sexuality, but not in her ability to be conscious about its safety. On the other hand, the man is portrayed as being inherently in control of his sexual safety, only adding to the stigma that men are, by nature, sexual; while women are not.

Let's explore what is at stake if the media, and especially celebrated shows, keep portraying these double standards between male and female sexuality. Already, what has kept women from fully being able to own their sexuality in the past is the idea that men and women are completely different in their sexual needs. Sex was thought of as something that a woman didn't even need to enjoy; it was something she did in order to reproduce. In many households men and women even slept in separate twin beds only joined together when the man felt it necessary. Thankfully today we have come a long way from the idea that sex need only be enjoyable for a man. However, women still have to struggle against stereotypes and double standards in order to enjoy the simple rights that a man has to his body.

Many might argue that men and women are finally equal in their ability to express themselves sexually. This may be true. Indeed, women are able to make many vast decisions about their sexuality; however, there is still an implication in society that although women maybe asserting their sexual power they are still not in control of it. We see this through the examples from only three episodes of the show *Sex and the City*. Women that do seem in control of their sexuality and use it overtly are threatening and need to be classified as women who act

like men, not a unique woman with a unique sexuality, but a woman who must be taking her sexual cues from men. Perhaps these flaws are not shortcomings of the show *Sex and the City*, but rather a reflection of our society. The success of this show says much about our culture and its needs. Obviously women throughout the country and worldwide needed representations of thirty-something women who are single, sexual, and not afraid to talk about it. Women are able to relate to these characters and their desire to talk about and have sex. For these reasons, the show was a much needed breath of fresh air for women around the world who needed to know that being sexual is being normal; however, that does not mean that the efforts toward sexual equality should stop here. If *Sex and the City* is a less than perfect representation of sexual equality then the only conclusion must be that we do not live in a sexually equal society.

This sexual inequality is only one aspect of greater inequalities between genders and this evidence alone shows that we still live in a patriarchal society here in the United States. Although women's freedoms have come a long way it is still an upward struggle for equality. What damages efforts towards sexual equality is not a show such as *Sex and the City*, for this show does portray women with sexual independence and courage; however, it is viewing this show without thinking critically about it and how it could be improved. In many ways it is the first show of its kind and it does advocate many aspects of the equality that women are striving for. But there is always room for improvement, and in the show's case, perhaps it is a small step towards something greater, or just a reflection of what our society is willing to deal with at this time.

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